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# THE MONKS OF MAHEE ISLAND.

BY JOHN VINYCOMB, M.R.I.A., &c.

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THE CLOIC-TEAC (ROUND TOWER ON INIS-MAHEE.

*(Drawn by Joseph Carey, 1902.)*

## The Monks of Mahee Island.

BY JOHN VINYCOMB, M.R.I.A., &c.

MAHEE Island is the modern name of an ancient ecclesiastical seat, the 'In Oenach Mochae' of the Irish "Annals;" the Nedrum of the "Acta Sanctorum," and the "Neddrum" of the "Monasticon." The name now in use is a corruption of Inis Mochae (Inis-Mohee), and is derived from St. Mochaoi, who was the founder and patron saint of the church, and whose death is recorded by the faithful Tigernach, A.D. 497. Mochae nOendroma quievit, "Mochae of Nendrum rested." Nendrum, now called Mahee Island or Inis Mahee, situated in Strangford Lough, about thirteen miles N.N.E. from Downpatrick. There remains at the present day the base of a round tower and the foundations of the church, measuring 54ft. 4in. by 22ft. 4in., encompassed by traces of a triple cashel. This ancient institution was one of the class of monasteries which combined educational pursuits with the monastic discipline. St. Finian, the founder of Moville, was sent thither for the purpose of being instructed, and St. Colman, the founder of Dromore, was a distinguished student under St. Caylen, or, as he is sometimes called, Mochay (Caylen or Cailan was his first name). The parentage and kindred of the first abbot of this house are noticed in Aengus's tract, "De Martibus Sanctorum Hiberniae," as follows: "Bronagh, daughter of Milcon, with whom St. Patrick was in

bondage, was mother of Mochee of Aendrum of Loch Cuan,<sup>(1)</sup> and of Comraire of Uisneach. Nendrum appears to have been early chosen as an episcopal seat. The "Annals of the Four Masters" contain many references to the abbots and bishops of Nendrum. It is last mentioned in the annals A.D. 974. Bishop Reeves, in his learned monograph on Nendrum published in the papers of the Down and Connor and Dromore Church Architecture Society (Belfast, 1845),<sup>(2)</sup> from which the above notes are taken, the site of this ancient church is for the first time accurately determined. The author says probably the abbey was pillaged and demolished by the Danes, whose ships were constantly in Strangford Lough. When next the name appears, it is as belonging to the property of the see of Down, with which John de Courcey, in 1178, when the abbey was restored under a new aspect, takes the liberty of making it over as an affiliation to the monks of an English abbey. At the northern extremity of the island are the ruins of an ancient Norman square castle, similar in structure to those which abound along the shores of Strangford Lough. From this building a causeway leads to Island Reagh, which is covered only at high water, and was probably coeval in its construction with the castle. The following lines were suggested by the lives and labours of the missionary monks of Inis Mahee.

## THE MONKS OF MAHEE ISLAND.

In olden days, as I've heard say—

Old records tell the story—

How men retired to deserts wild,

To praise God and His glory.

To people rude and wild they preached,

And taught the truth in sadness,

Besought the Lord to bless the land,

With thankful hearts, in gladness.

For all the good His bounty gave,

Of sunlit sea and sky,

The beauteous earth, the stars above,

The hope of heaven on high.

And some in lonely isles set up

Their church and tower round,

Beneath whose shade their prayerful lives

In benisons were bound.

In old Mahee, the sacred isle

By Strangford's silent shore,

The peaceful monks in prayer would kneel,

And aid from heaven implore.

(1) Loch Cuan—ancient name of Strangford Lough.

(2) Reprinted in the "Ulster Journal of Archaeology," Vol. VIII. p. 59-68.

To banish sin and shame from earth,  
 And touch the heart with love :  
 To make the world's all-sinful souls,  
 More meet for heaven above.

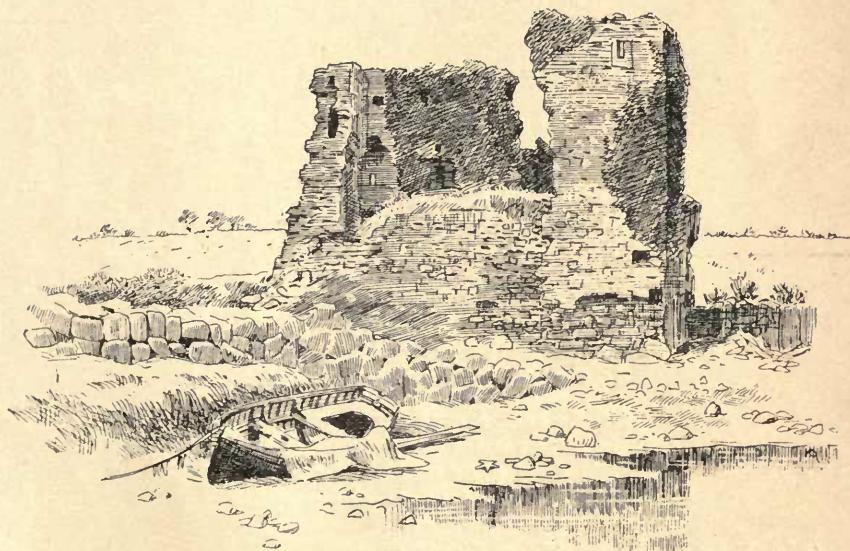
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The monks are gone, their deeds remain,  
 Old savage habits banished :  
 The world is better that they lived,  
 Tho' church and tower have vanished.

To simple faith and honest toil  
 Came peace like gentle maiden :  
 And in her train the Arts of life  
 With love and blessings laden.

\* \* \* \*

Hear now the words of saints of old,  
 Come down from ages hoary :  
 "O save the world from sin and strife,  
 And give to God the glory."



NORMAN CASTLE ON INIS-MAHEE.

*(Drawn by Joseph Carey, 1902.)*



INN SIGN "THE MERMAID OF MAHEE,"<sup>(3)</sup>  
KIRKCUBBIN, COUNTY DOWN.  
(Painted by John Vinycomb.)

## THE MERMAID OF MAHEE.

### A LEGEND OF STRANGFORD LOUGH.

When fairies lived in this old land,<sup>(4)</sup>  
And kelpies held the streams,  
Such sights were seen and music heard  
As come to men in dreams.

To the lone peasant's fond belief,  
In legends wild and gory,  
Of sprite benign and goblin dam'd,  
Is due the wondrous story.

How the rude savage glories most  
In terrors weird and fearful,  
While timid souls take up the tale  
With sadd'ning hearts and tearful.

(3) Inis Mahee is a pleasant sail from Kircubbin.

(4) The mermaid appears to have been at all times a favourite object in poetry and legend. It holds an important place in the mediæval bestiaries or popular treatises on natural history. It still retains its place in popular legends of our sea-coasts, and more especially in the remoter parts of our island. The stories of the merrow, or Irish fairy, hold a prominent place among Crofton Croker's fairy legends of the South of Ireland.—"History of Caricature and of Grotesque in Art," by Thos. Wright, M.A., F.S.A.

They saw in fairy-haunted rath  
 The elfins sport and play ;  
 They heard unearthly music float  
 Between the night and day,

And feared, if seen, to be bewitched,  
 Or carried under ground ;  
 To dance by night in fairyland  
 To magic music's sound.

They feared the moonlight's baleful sheen  
 By lonely moor or river ;  
 They feared the dreaded, weird banshee  
 That wails for mortals ever.

But more they feared the sweet Merroe  
 That haunts the lonely shore :  
 For he who hears th' enchanting strain  
 Is lost for evermore.

And who is there that has not heard  
 Of sirens of the sea,  
 The merroe dread of Strangford Lough  
 The Mermaid of Mahee ?

The sea-maid there would oftimes haunt,  
 At evening's silent close,  
 With tuneful harp and song so sweet,  
 When from the waves she rose.

Her golden locks in freedom float  
 Around her beauteous form ;  
 Her lovely face, with eyes so blue,  
 Deride the coming storm.

She thrills the air with melodie,  
 So sweet, so clear, so high,  
 That the lone fisher turns to hear,  
 And listens with a sigh.

For well he knows he may not stay—  
 His earthly lot is over ;  
 Follow he must beneath the waves  
 The Mermaid, as her lover.

And tales are told how many a one,  
 Lost in Loch Cuan's tide,  
 Had heard the Mermaid's charméd strain,  
 And fled with her to bide,

In coral caves beneath the waves,  
 Or sport by pearly strand ;  
 Transformed by fairy sea-maid's power  
 To Merman's jovial band.

And once, 'tis said, a holy monk,  
On Mahee's sacred soil,  
Was lost to sight for many a day,  
No more as priest to toil.

For he, beguiled by charmer's strains,  
Swiftly followed after,  
Nor had he thought of brethren,  
Or Abbot's hearty laughter,

For, married to a Mer-mayden  
At bottom of the sea,  
He lived and frolic'd with the best,  
Forgot was Isle Mahee.

Till once again he heard the chime  
Of matins sweetly sound :  
He blessed himself—and ere he knew,  
Transported was to ground.

And now in after years come back,  
With mind distressed and hazy,  
Told how he'd lived beneath the sea—  
The brethren cried, "He's crazy."

Beside his round tower's loft pile  
He knelt him down to pray,  
And bade the brethren this believe,  
And swore by Saint Mochae.(5)

The Abbot frowned with look severe,  
While sad his thoughts they ran  
On women's ways—then slowly said,  
"We'll put him under ban."

Said he : "You'll live and dream your dreams  
Within your prison cell,  
High in the round tower's topmost flight,  
And ring the service bell."(6)

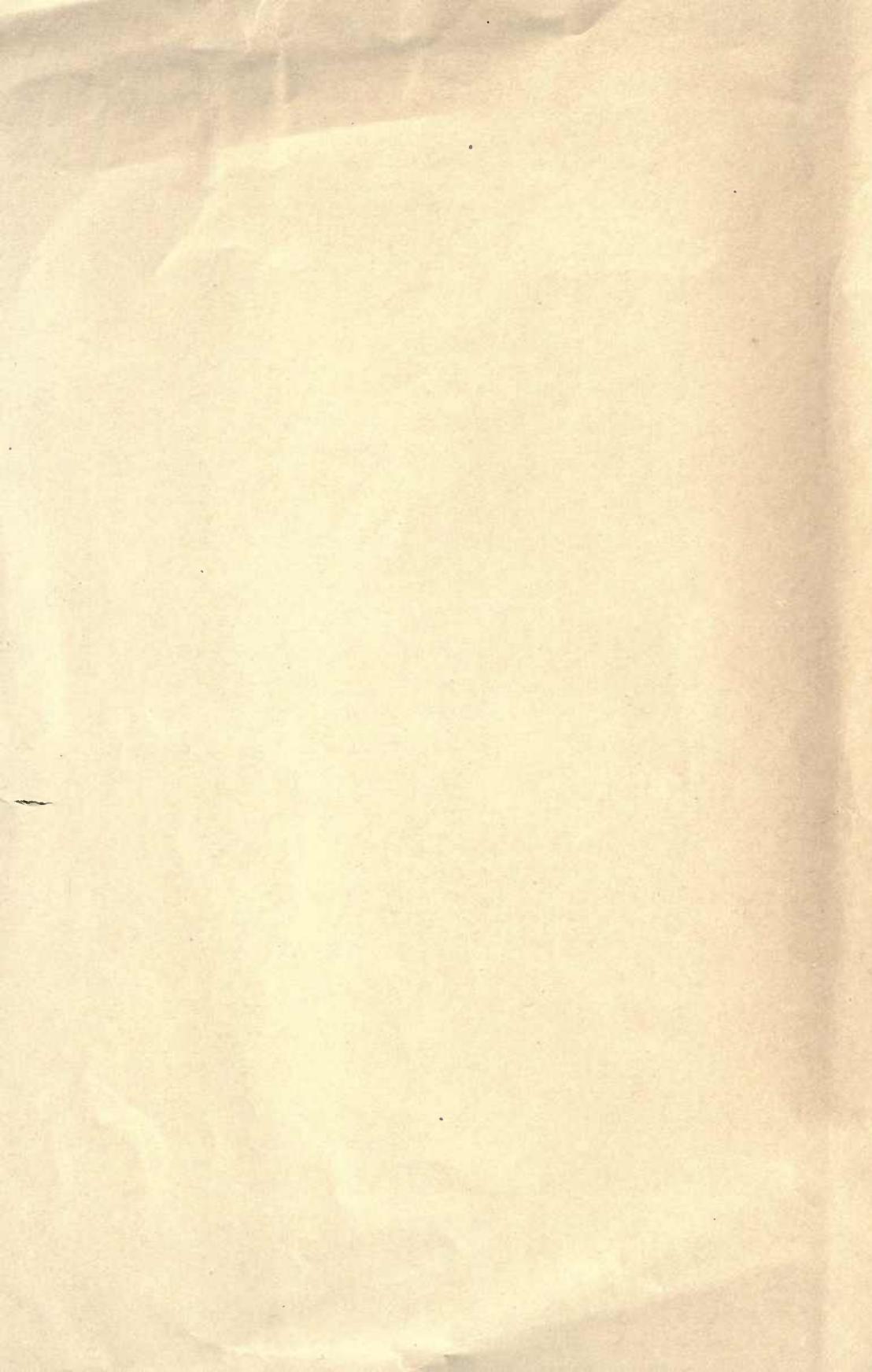
And there for nigh a year he lived  
To ring the sacred bell  
(Which Patric to the Abbot gave,  
The evil fiends to quell).

Then shrivèd he was of all his sins  
(The brethren gathered round),  
For reason came—and penitence—  
Ere laid in hallowed ground.

JOHN VINYCOMBE.

(5) St. Mochae died A.D. 497. Friend and disciple of St. Patrick.

(6) The ancient and original use of bells in early Christian churches was to drive away evil spirits.





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